

Why fine teachers are often the best union leaders

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I'm struck by how many of the skills and understandings good teachers acquire can also make them fine union activists. Though they may not realize it, teachers have already learned a great deal about organizing - through their work as teachers. Though I never observed Karen Lewis teach, I'll wager that as CTU President she uses skills that she mastered in her classroom, teaching strategies that empowered her students, making them critical thinkers and active learners. Instructional choices though are only part of what make good union leaders like fine teachers- and vice versa. Another similarity is that union officers pledged to leading "member-driven" unions (again, as Karen Lewis reminds us she is) are elected on programs they help members to realize. Members have voted on the "curriculum" by electing leaders who are pledged to carry out specific practices and ideals.

Being a chapter leader/building representative in most schools today is similar to teaching students who have become accustomed to "skill, drill, kill." Many teachers, like students, have become socialized to following orders, no matter how counterproductive to real learning. They know what they're being told to do is boring and irrelevant to their lives but as John Dewey notes in "My Pedagogic Creed," their chains have become comfortable. Breaking free doesn't seem worth the effort, especially when the disciplinary apparatus to keep teachers and students in line is so threatening. What if members don't want to be empowered? Great chapter leaders draw on the thinking and strategies fine teachers use when faced with a class that wants teachers to "deliver" the lesson rather than supporting them to think, to "own" their learning.

I think building a democratic culture in the union that supports members to act on their own behalf uses the same strategies as creating a "community of learners" in a classroom. If you know how to do that, you're more than half-way home to being a stupendous chapter chair/building leader.

1. We create a culture of community. We try to make sure everyone feels cared for, by making time and space for people to discuss what's on their minds, their reality.
2. We find ways to relate students' reality to the curriculum. That process may be a formal lesson or it may involve pointing out links between what students care deeply about and the curriculum. If it's not possible to make those connections, no matter how creative you are, it's likely the curriculum needs to be adjusted or junked. (We can't blame the students for a rotten curriculum.)
3. We make sure the classroom is organized to support the behaviors we want. We have a plan for what we want achieved but we leave space for hearing that what students want doesn't coincide with our plan. As for dealing with students who are negative, we're firm but friendly. As one classroom management manual puts it, "Be a person but don't take things personally."
4. We try to trust our students. When problems occur we ask them what's happened, rather than assuming they are at fault. We try not to be defensive.

Building union democracy in the school requires creating and nurturing a school culture that assumes that when problems occur, members have the right and capacity to organize a response. They reach out to one another and think through ideas. They understand themselves as being “the union” - often without realizing this is the case. Not every member is going to want to be empowered, any more than every student in our class will cheerfully greet lessons that require shaking off those chains. Sometimes we have to take a step back and give students direct instruction, to bring those unfamiliar or uncomfortable with active learning a chance to do what they feel is “real learning.”

Still, we know we have done our job well as teachers when our students can do challenging work with one another, without our supervision. That same environment defines a democratic, mobilized union chapter: a sense of clear purpose, possibility, and power.